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Washington
Department of
**FISH and
WILDLIFE**



DISTRICT 4 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Benton and Franklin counties

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DISTRICT 4 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 4 is located in the south central part of the state, in the Columbia Basin (Figure 1). The district is comprised of Benton and Franklin counties and administratively is part of WDFW's South-Central Region 3. The following game management units (GMUs) are included in District 4: 372 (Rattlesnake Hills), 373 (Horse Heaven), 379 (Ringold), and 381 (Kahlotus).

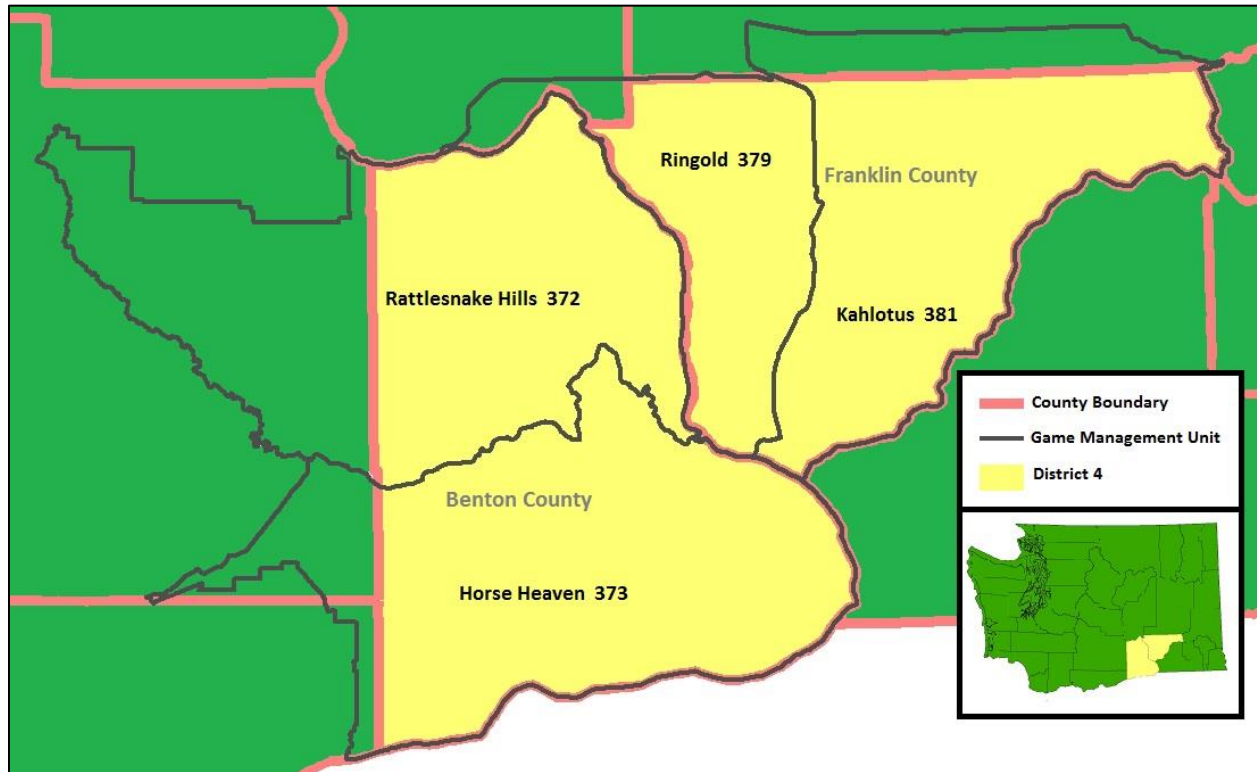


Figure 1. Location of District 4 in Washington and associated counties and game management units.

Several of Washington's major rivers are prominent in this district. The Hanford Reach of the Columbia River runs between Benton and Franklin counties. This 50-mile stretch is one of the most scenic areas of the Columbia in Washington. The Snake and Palouse rivers define the eastern boundary of Franklin County. Near the heart of District 4 is the confluence of the Yakima, Snake, and Walla Walla rivers, with the main stem of the Columbia River at Tri-Cities (Pasco, Kennewick, and Richland). Large populations of waterfowl congregate throughout the district for breeding, migrating, and wintering, despite the fact that this is the driest part of Washington, with only six to nine inches of precipitation per year. Riparian vegetation provides habitat and cover for game birds and the breaks along the Snake and Palouse rivers are favored by congregations of wintering mule deer.

Upland habitats are part of the Columbia Plateau Ecoregion, which was historically dominated by native shrubsteppe. Since the 1800s, farmers and ranchers have been working the land around District 4. Intensive irrigated agriculture supporting many crop circles, orchards, and vineyards is

a major land use in the Yakima River Valley, southern Benton County, and western Franklin County. Dryland wheat is dominant in central Benton County and eastern Franklin County. Many thousands of acres of this wheat country have been enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) or State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement Program (SAFE), providing cover for mule deer and other wildlife that have lost much of their natural shrubsteppe habitat. Fires are currently the largest threat to remaining habitat patches, which are frequently started along roads by parking in vegetation or discarded cigarettes. Invasive cheat grass has created a flammable carpet through the shrubsteppe, resulting in large and fast fires. Sagebrush takes decades to return post-fire, so please be careful and fire-wise.

In Benton County, large east-west trending ridges, including the Horse Heaven Hills and Rattlesnake Hills, add to the topographic diversity of the district. The eastern Franklin County landscape includes the rolling hills of the Palouse Prairie and the southernmost extent of the channeled scablands. Western Franklin County contains several small lakes and depression wetlands that provide additional wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities.

Hunting access in District 4 is more limited than some other parts of the state, as much of the district is held in private ownership or by federal agencies that do not allow hunting. However, quality opportunities do exist, and WDFW is always trying to expand hunting access. Information and related links to several public sites listed in each game section can be found in the Major Public Lands section. Information on how to access private land through one of WDFW's access programs is available in the Private Lands section and on the [WDFW website](#).

Overall, the landscape of District 4 provides a diversity of habitats favored by waterfowl, upland birds, including chukar, partridge, pheasant, quail, and dove, and big game, including deer and elk. Welcome to District 4 and happy hunting!

ELK

Opportunities for elk hunting in District 4 are primarily limited to lands surrounding the Hanford Reach National Monument in GMU 372 to the west (Blackrock Elk Area 3722) and south (Corral Canyon Elk Area 3721). Surveys on the Hanford Monument in January 2017 yielded a total herd estimate of 1,070 elk. This herd is above population objectives, but harvest remains challenging, as the herd can seek refuge on the federal Hanford lands during hunting season.

Typically, during general hunting seasons, 175-190 hunters pursue elk in District 4. Of those, 20-25 (usually modern firearm) are successful. The Range-12 fire of 2016 had a devastating impact on hunter success, as most of the lands west of Hanford and Rattlesnake Mountain were burned completely. Last year, 186 hunters reported a harvest of eight elk during general seasons, for a hunter success rate of only two percent. Harvest success usually depends upon forage conditions on the Hanford site and the availability of forage crops on farm lands outside of the protected area. Hunters are usually more successful early in the season. While most of the land around the

Hanford Monument is private, elk hunters can pursue elk in Benton County on WDFW's Thornton and Rattlesnake Slope units of the Sunnyside Wildlife Area north of Prosser and Benton City. There are also limited opportunities for elk hunting in the [Juniper Dunes Wilderness](#) and the [Windmill Ranch Unit](#) of the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area.



Image 1. Youth hunter with elk harvested in GMU 372.

On private land, the best way to secure access is to apply for a special permit through the Landowner Hunt Program (LHP). If selected, permit holders are guaranteed a one-day guided hunt. Most permits are limited to antlerless opportunity for youth hunters, but a few permits for any elk are issued each year. See the current [hunting regulations](#) for more information.

DEER

District 4 primarily offers good mule deer hunting opportunity. White-tailed deer seasons exist to allow hunters to harvest a white-tailed deer if encountered, but this species is relatively uncommon in the district, making up less than one percent of deer on surveys.

Eastern Franklin County is an important wintering area for mule deer that migrate to the relatively mild winter conditions near the Snake River. The highest concentrations of deer are in the Kahlotus Unit (GMU 381), with a large percentage migrating in from northern units starting

in October, right around the opening of the modern firearm general season. During mild winters, some of these deer may remain further north or delay moving into the district. The late general muzzleloader season in Franklin County (GMUs 379 and 381) provides opportunity for hunters to harvest buck or antlerless deer in November.

Post-hunt surveys in December 2016 yielded an estimated eight bucks to 100 does (Figure 2). This value is below the ten-year average of 18 bucks to 100 does and is likely attributable to the high hunter success and low buck escapement in the open country. Fawn numbers were at 72 fawns per 100 does (Figure 2). This compares well to the ten-year average of 60 fawns per 100 does.

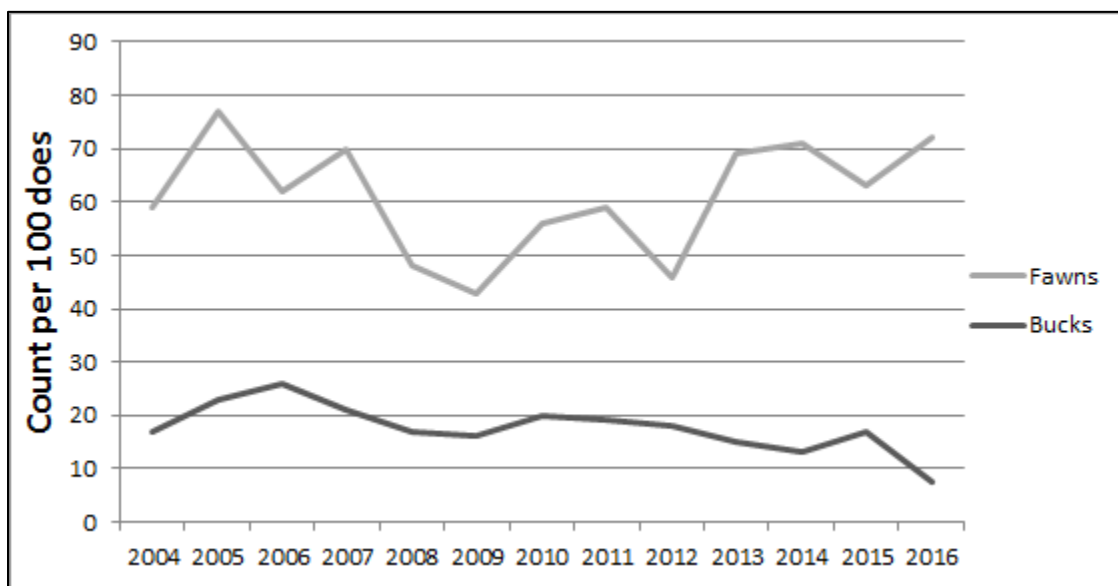


Figure 2. Buck and fawn ratios per 100 does in District 4.

In 2016, the hunter success rate during the general seasons for deer in District 4 was 26 percent, compared to the five-year average of 33 percent. Statewide average hunter success in 2016 was 28.9 percent. District 4 hunters generally enjoy a high success rate primarily due to restricted private land access for hunters and a lack of cover for deer. Winter conditions remained mild through the hunting season and thus few migratory deer were available for hunters, resulting in the lower success rate.



Image 2. A buck harvested in Franklin County (GMU 381).

In northern Benton County (GMU 372), spend some time scouting for deer in the Thornton and Rattlesnake units of the Sunnyside/Snake River Wildlife Area (Figure 11). Deer Area 3372 - Sunnyside (Benton and Yakima counties) was created in 2016 to provide additional general season opportunities along the Yakima River from Prosser to Union Gap, including an early muzzleloader season and late archery and late muzzleloader seasons. In southern Benton County (GMU 373), there are small groups of deer available to hunters on land in the Horse Heaven Hills, managed by the Bureau of Land Management, scattered tracts of DNR, and private property in our access programs. The USFWS's Umatilla NWR Deer Areas 3071 (Whitcomb) and 3072 (Paterson) units (Figure 12) provide 80 special permits required to harvest deer on the NWR, including two archery periods in October and three muzzleloader hunts from November into December. Youth, buck, and antlerless permits are available on both units. Please consult the current hunting regulations for more details.

There are many properties where hunters can gain access to deer through one of WDFW's private land access programs. Preseason scouting is advisable in order to learn where to hunt and obtain permission from private landowners. WDFW's [GoHunt](#) map website is the place to learn where private lands access areas are located. You can also check the [Private Lands Access](#) page. Access properties frequently change from year to year and sometimes even within a season. It is advised to double check that lands previously available for hunting are still open to the public and in the same access program.

UPLAND BIRD

Benton and Franklin counties offer upland bird hunters many opportunities. Habitat and weather are the key components influencing the survival and reproduction of birds. At the WDFW Sunnyside/Snake River Wildlife Area, funding has been awarded for enhancing nesting opportunities for several species, including pheasant, quail, and doves. Over the past year, several acres were planted with native shrubs and grasses as part of an ongoing effort to enhance wildlife habitat on WDFW lands.

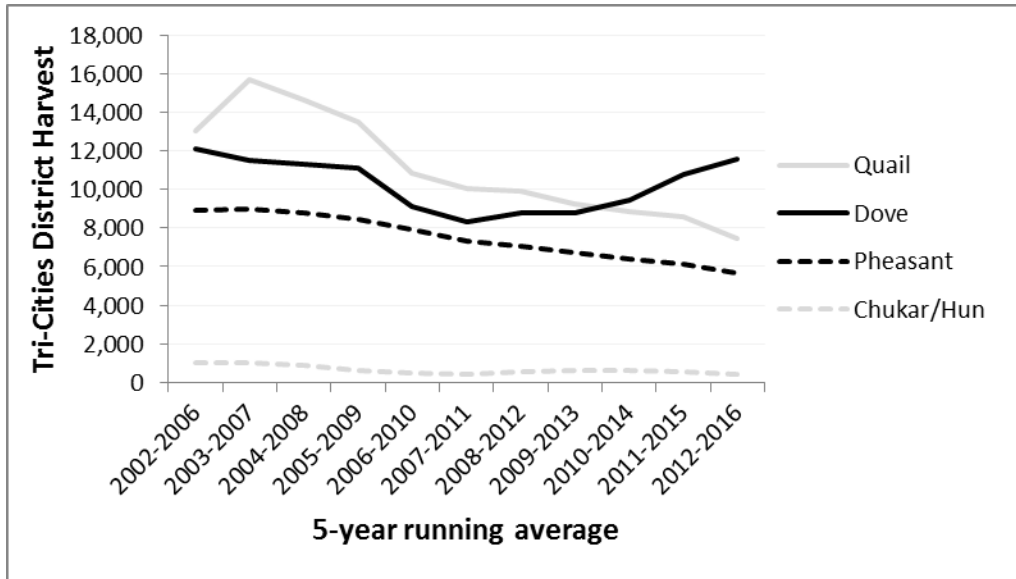


Figure 3. Upland bird harvest trends based on five-year running averages.

PHEASANT

In 2016, ring-necked pheasant hunters and harvest in District 4 increased by 13 percent and 8 percent respectively (Figure 4). Pheasant harvest of 4,705 birds remained 16 percent below the five-year harvest average in District 4. These harvest numbers appear to be closely related to hunter participation, as harvest per hunter effort has been stable statewide and in District 4 (Figure 5).

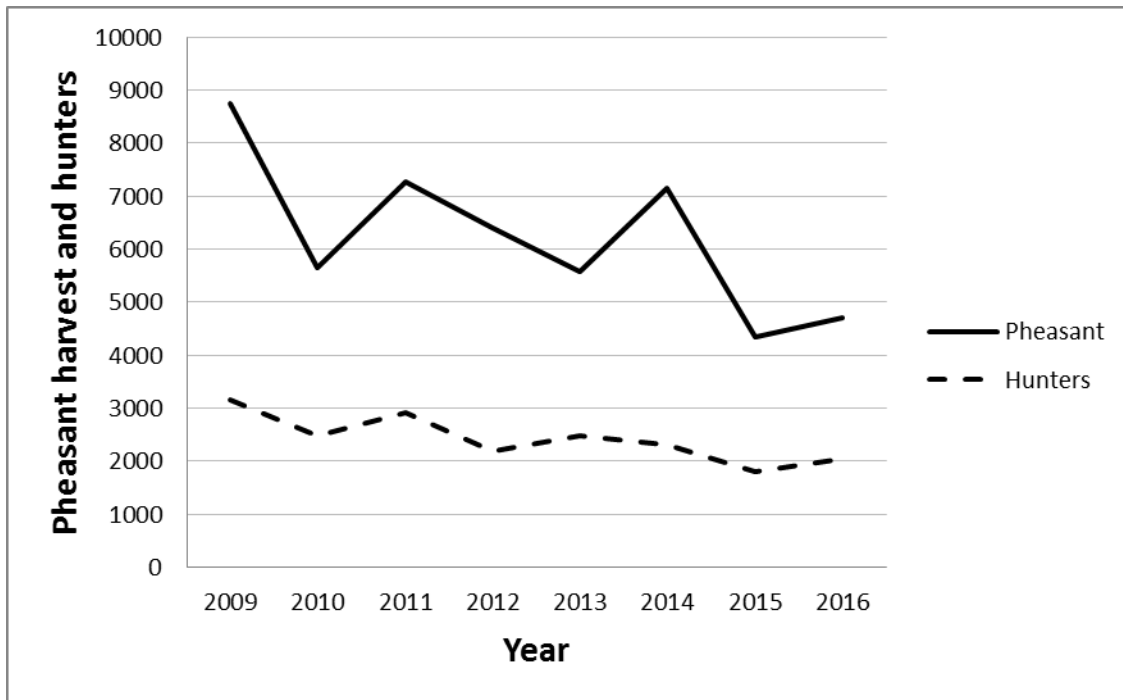


Figure 4. Pheasants harvested and pheasant hunters in District 4.

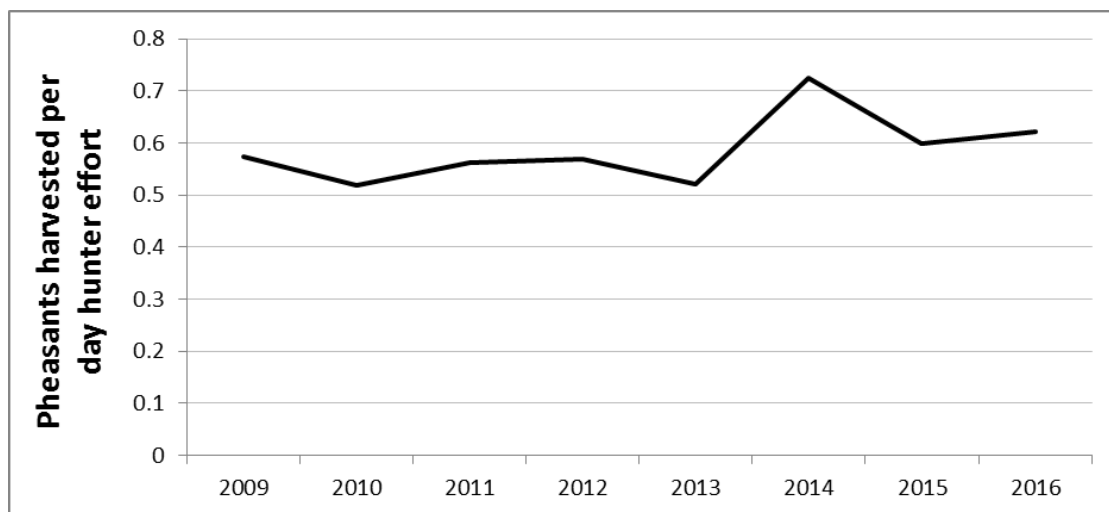


Figure 5. Pheasants harvested per unit hunter effort in District 4.

Each summer, biologists with the Yakama Nation conduct pheasant productivity surveys. In 2016, 0.16 pheasants were observed per mile (Figure 6). This count is below the 10-year average of 0.30 since 1993. Pheasant populations are often limited by cold, wet weather, especially in the spring when chicks are newly hatched. This year's exceptionally cold winter and wet early spring likely resulted in unfavorable pheasant survival, although biologists have seen good numbers of broods in some locations in 2017.

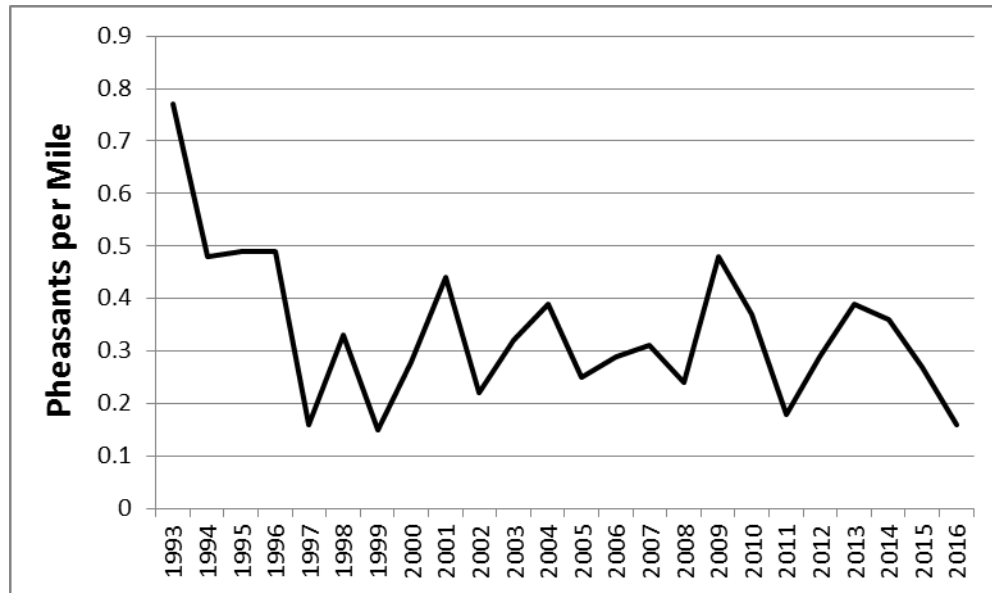


Figure 6. Pheasants per mile during brood counts on the Yakama Reservation. Data comes from Yakama Nation, and can be found at <http://www.ynwildlife.org/uplandbird.php>.

Pheasant hunters should focus efforts in dense weedy and grassy areas adjacent to wetlands, streams, and irrigation waterways. Birds may also be found around irrigated farmland. Some of the best pheasant habitat in the district is in north Franklin County on and surrounding WDFW's Windmill Ranch Wildlife Area (non-toxic shot), Mesa Lake Wildlife Area, and the Bailie Memorial Youth Ranch. Each of these hunting areas has two designated parking areas where hunters are required to park and register, and each allows a maximum of five vehicles per lot. Other areas with good pheasant habitat include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Hanford Reach National Monument's East Wahluke Unit (Figure 11), Ringold (GMU 379), and [Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge](#) along the Columbia River, near the town of Paterson.

Going after birds planted as part of WDFW's [Pheasant Enhancement Program](#) is a great way to work dogs and get kids involved in hunting. Last year, WDFW planted pheasants at three locations: the Hope Valley Unit of the WDFW Sunnyside/Snake River Wildlife Area, and the Big Flat and Lost Island Habitat Management Units (HMU) held by the Army Corps of Engineers (Figure 7). In 2017, about 1,000 roosters will be released at these same locations. Pheasant release site locations can be found on the [GoHunt](#) website or at the program link above. Army Corps HMUs information is available [here](#). Nontoxic shot is required at release sites.



Image 3. Rooster planted at the Hope Valley Unit, Franklin County.

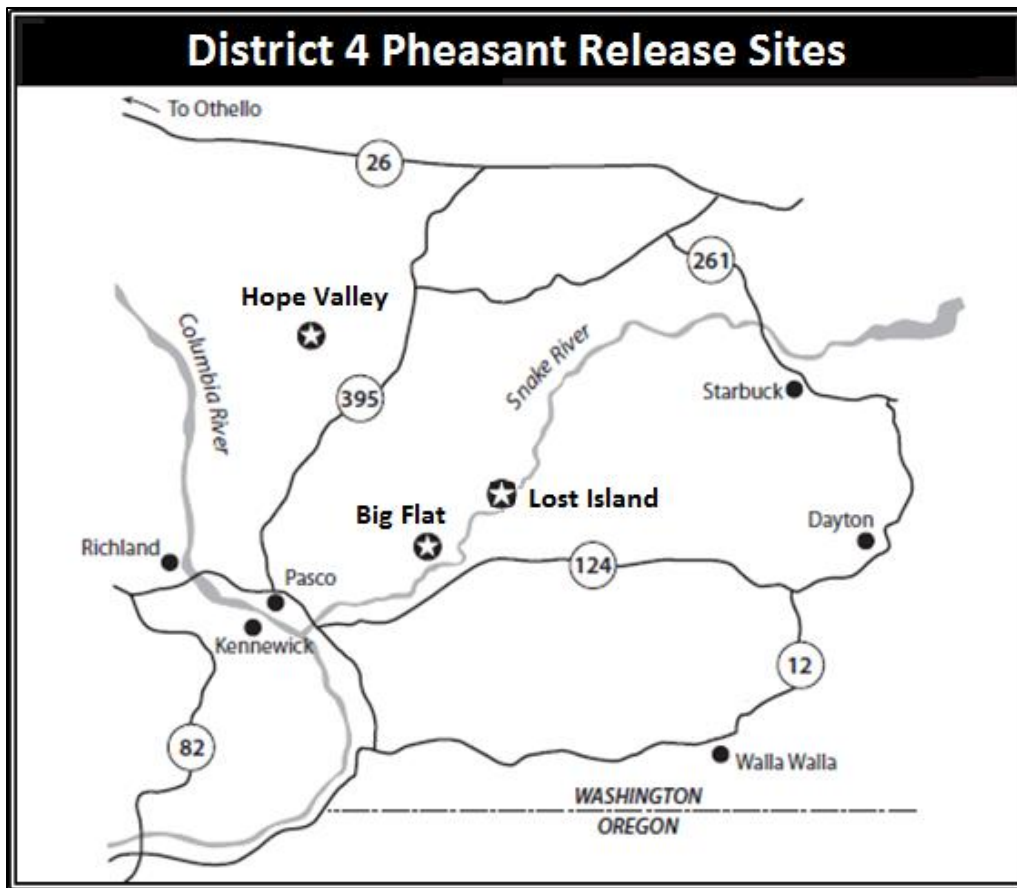


Figure 7. Location of Hope Valley, Big Flat, and Lost Island pheasant release sites.

QUAIL

Abundant California quail are present in the district. There has been a decreasing trend in harvest numbers over the past decade (Figure 3). Surveys conducted by the Yakama Nation show that quail numbers vary greatly year to year, but that 2016 was an above average year for quail in the region (Figure 8). The best quail habitat in District 4 is similar to those listed above for pheasant. In addition, anywhere along water bodies where riparian and herbaceous vegetation intersect will provide quail habitat. An ideal setting is where Russian olives or willows are adjacent to black greasewood or sagebrush.

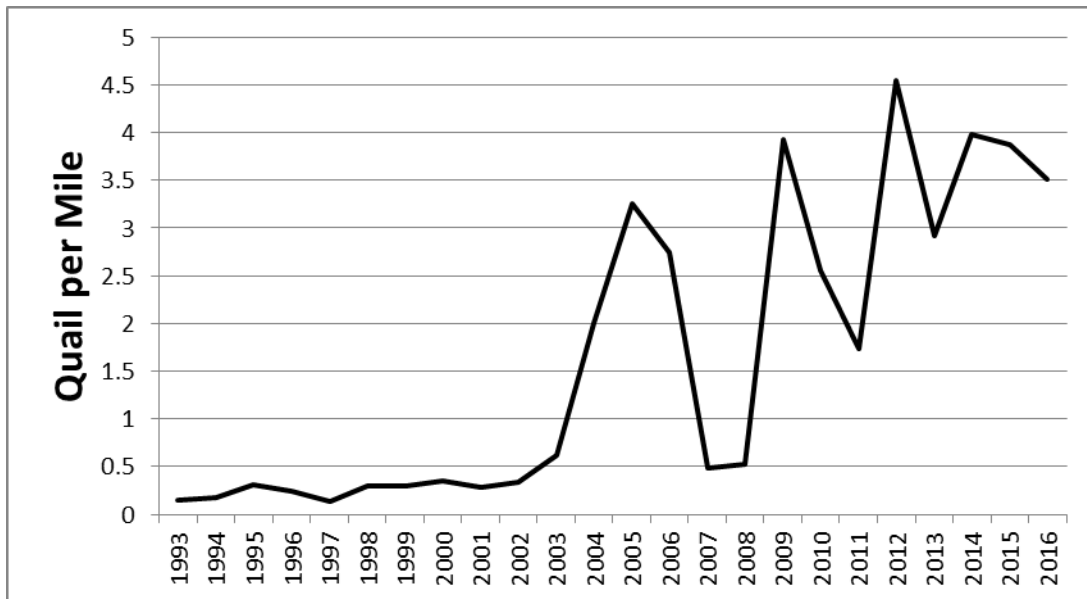


Figure 8. Average quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Reservation. Data comes from Yakama Nation, and can be found at <http://www.ynwildlife.org/uplandbird.php>.

DOVE

Mourning dove harvest in District 4 has been increasing over the past several years (Figure 3). Despite poor indicators of productivity at last year's banding sites in Franklin County, harvest numbers for 2016 remained close to the record harvest from the year prior. This season, abundance appears to be low, but with a good number of young birds, indicating locally good production. There should be opportunity for hunters to find doves moving through the area and in local patches where production may have been more successful. Weather patterns play a critical role in determining how many doves are present during the season opener. Focus hunting efforts in or near wheat or corn stubble fields in the irrigated Yakima and Columbia Basins. The best combination of habitat includes a stubble field near water and large isolated trees or power lines where doves perch and attract other doves.

Licensed small game hunters are also encouraged to harvest Eurasian Collared Doves, which are an introduced exotic species spreading across North America. They are larger than mourning doves with a square tail and thin black half-collar on the back of their necks. This species is usually most abundant in rural-suburban areas near mature trees. Numbers have been increasing across eastern Washington since first appearing in the state in 1990s.



Image 4. An adult male mourning dove banded as part of WDFW's Monitoring Program.

WATERFOWL

In Jan-March 2017, an outbreak of avian cholera occurred during the end of the hunting season in the Tri-Cities area. While it is estimated about 8,000 migratory birds (primarily waterfowl) were killed by the bacterial disease, there is no long term impact to regional waterfowl populations expected and the disease poses no risks to human health. **The outbreak does not impact 2017-2018 hunting locations or seasons.** Hunters and the public are always encouraged to report observations of groups of more than 10 sick or dead birds to their regional WDFW office.

The five-year average of ducks harvested in District 4 over the past decade has been increasing while the goose harvest has been fairly stable (Figure 9). After the season opener, hunter success will likely taper off as the local ducks become educated and restrict their daytime movements to local reserves and sanctuaries. At that point, hunters will likely have to wait for the migrants to arrive in the mid to late season. Weather patterns will determine when they will arrive and where they will congregate.

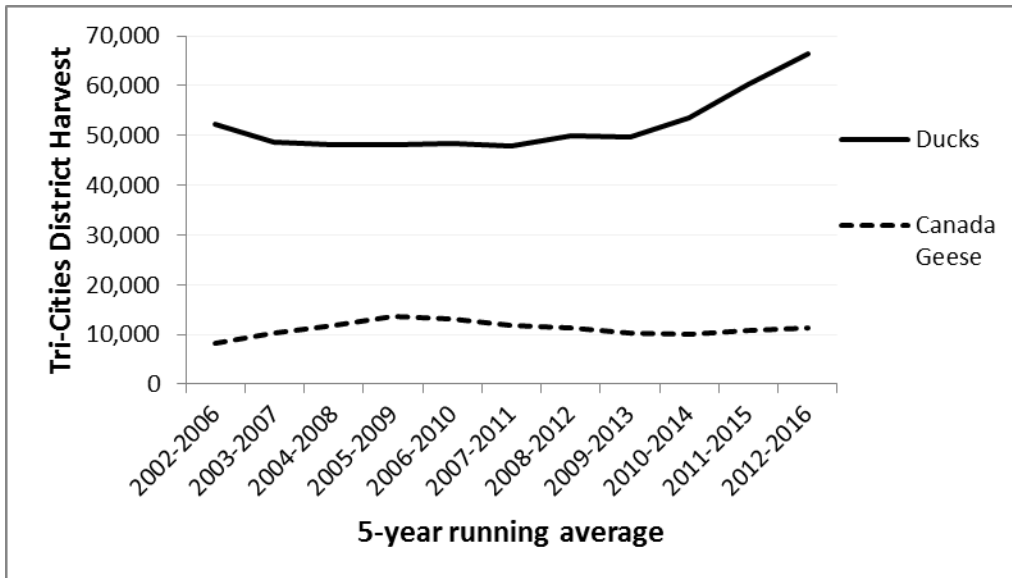


Figure 9. District 4 waterfowl harvest trends based on five-year running averages.

There are many places to hunt ducks and geese in the district. Small ponds and lakes can be found on WDFW's Windmill Ranch, Mesa Lake, and Bailie Memorial Youth Ranch. This year, wetland management activities will result in increased open water areas at the Windmill and Bailie Youth Ranches in time for duck season. Continued management of the Sunnyside and Snake River wildlife areas will result in more habitat for waterfowl and opportunities for hunters in the coming years. Scooteney Reservoir, managed by the [Bureau of Reclamation](#), can also provide good hunting. The Snake and Columbia rivers and associated water bodies will hold tens of thousands of ducks when the cold weather sets in. Access can be gained at the McNary and Umatilla National Wildlife Refuges and the Hanford Reach National Monument.

For an excellent introduction to waterfowl hunting, please see [Let's Go Waterfowl Hunting](#) on the WDFW website.



Image 5. A mallard brood in the Potholes Canal, Franklin County.

Canada geese nest on various river islands in the district and counts indicate a continued upward recovery since decreases in the early 2000s. In addition, thousands of migratory Canada geese will arrive in the district sometime in October or November. They can be pursued in the farm fields near the Snake and Columbia rivers. Most of the land is private, so hunters will want to secure permission before hunting.

Changes to the statewide goose bag limit this season sets daily limits for snow and white-fronted geese in addition to Canada/cackling (dark) geese limits. While white-fronted geese and the majority of snow geese usually pass through the district before and after the season (Figure 10), an increasing number of snow geese have been present in the district during goose season. This may help District 4 hunters when snow geese are present. Snow geese are sometimes found in large flocks on farmland near the Snake or Columbia rivers and McNary National Wildlife Refuge, but a few can occasionally mix in with large flocks of dark geese at any location.

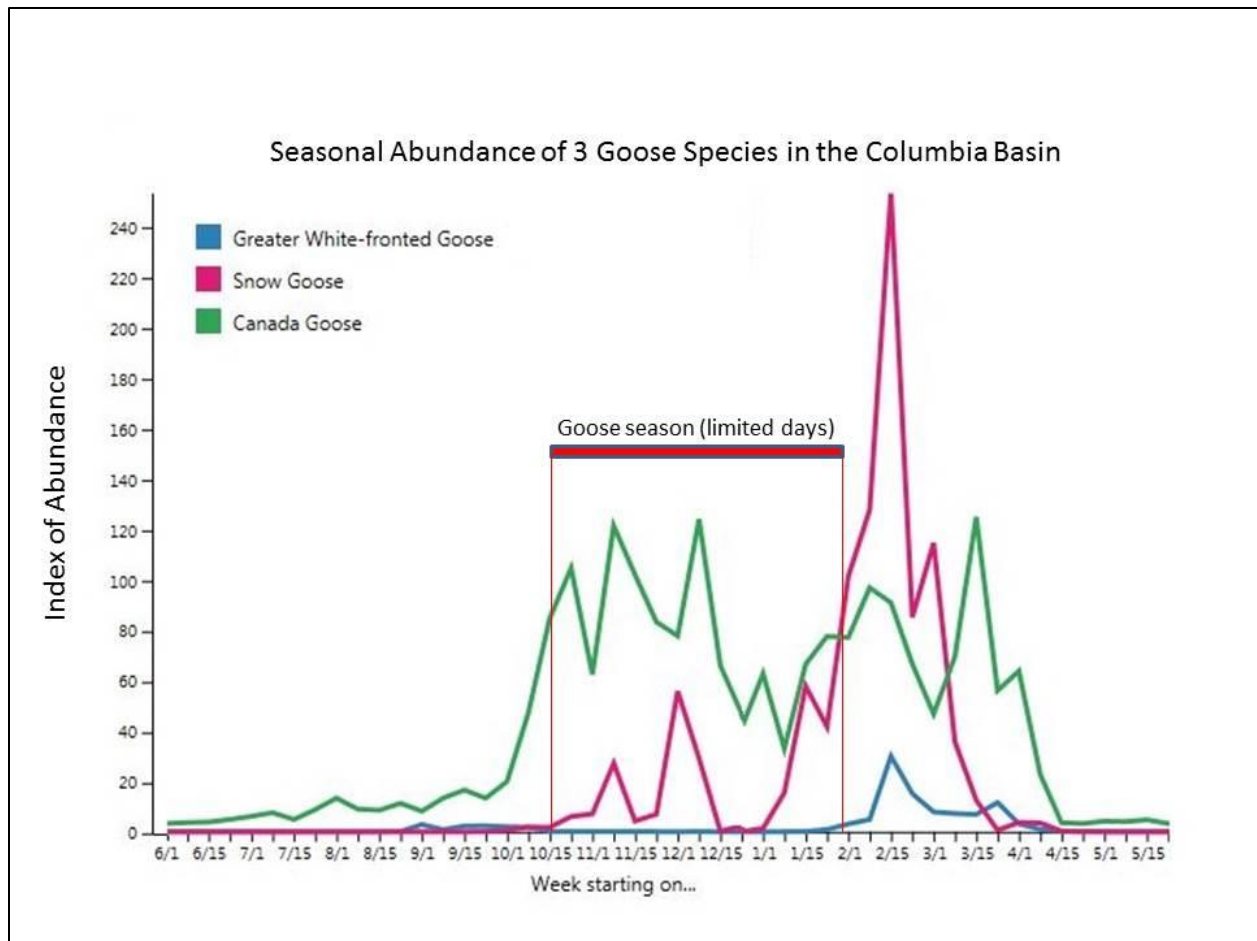


Figure 10. Seasonal abundance of three goose species in the Columbia Basin relative to hunting seasons. Data source: eBird.org

The Cropland Hunting Access Initiative is a program aimed at increasing waterfowl hunting access in the Columbia Basin. Benton and Franklin county farmers are currently being contacted to determine their interest in delaying tillage of corn and wheat stubble and providing hunter access on those acres. To ensure a quality hunting experience, properties are open for hunting only on Goose Days, and can be reserved via the Hunt by Reservation system. Watch the [WDFW website](#) for updated maps and directions to these fields in the coming weeks.



Image 6. Goose harvest in the Tri-Cities.

MAJOR PUBLIC LANDS

Hunting access in Benton and Franklin counties is more limited than some other parts of the state, as much of the district is held in private ownership or by federal agencies that do not allow hunting. However, quality opportunities on both public and private land do exist and WDFW is continually working to expand hunting access.

SUNNYSIDE-SNAKE RIVER WILDLIFE AREA

This wildlife area (Figure 11) comprises WDFW-owned land in the district and most parcels are open to hunting, but with specific restrictions at some units. Most of the units are managed specifically for wildlife, and enhanced hunting opportunities are possible through crop, habitat, and wetland management. For more information, please visit the [WDFW website](#). Directions to the Mesa Lake Unit (not described online) are located at the end of this document.

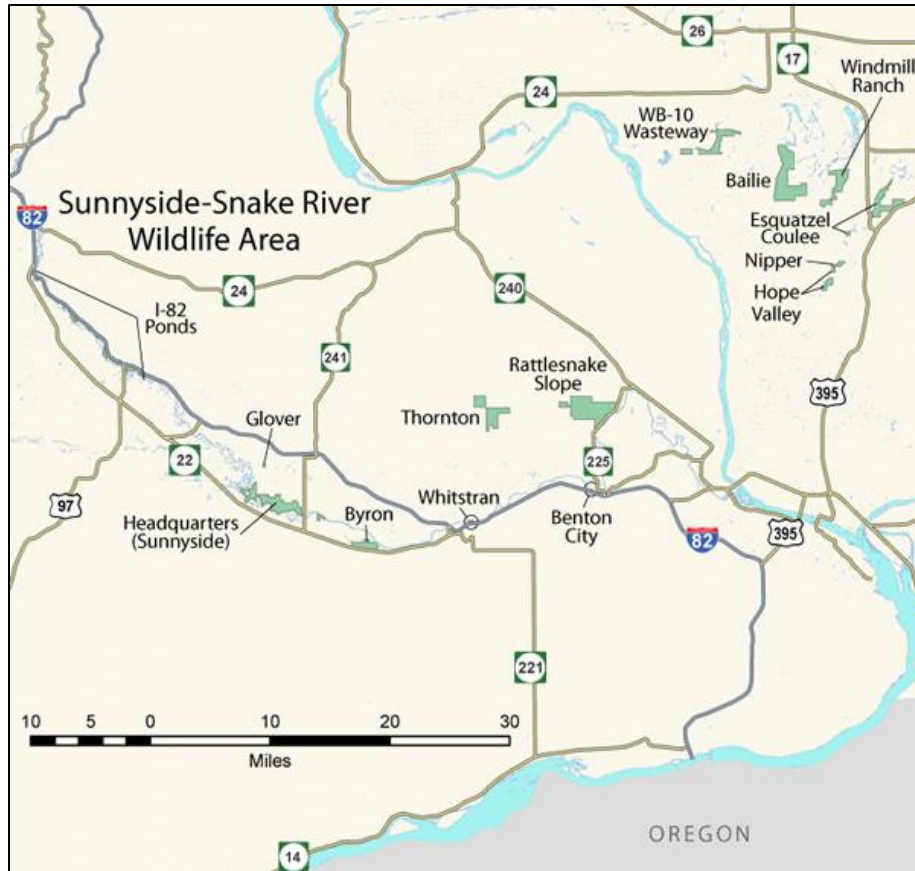


Figure 11. Map of the Sunnyside-Snake River Wildlife Area units.

MID-COLUMBIA RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE COMPLEX

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service allows hunting on a number of units of this refuge complex, including a portion of the Hanford Reach National Monument (Figure 12), a portion of the Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge (NWR, Figure 13), and certain areas within the McNary NWR. Details and maps can be found [here](#).

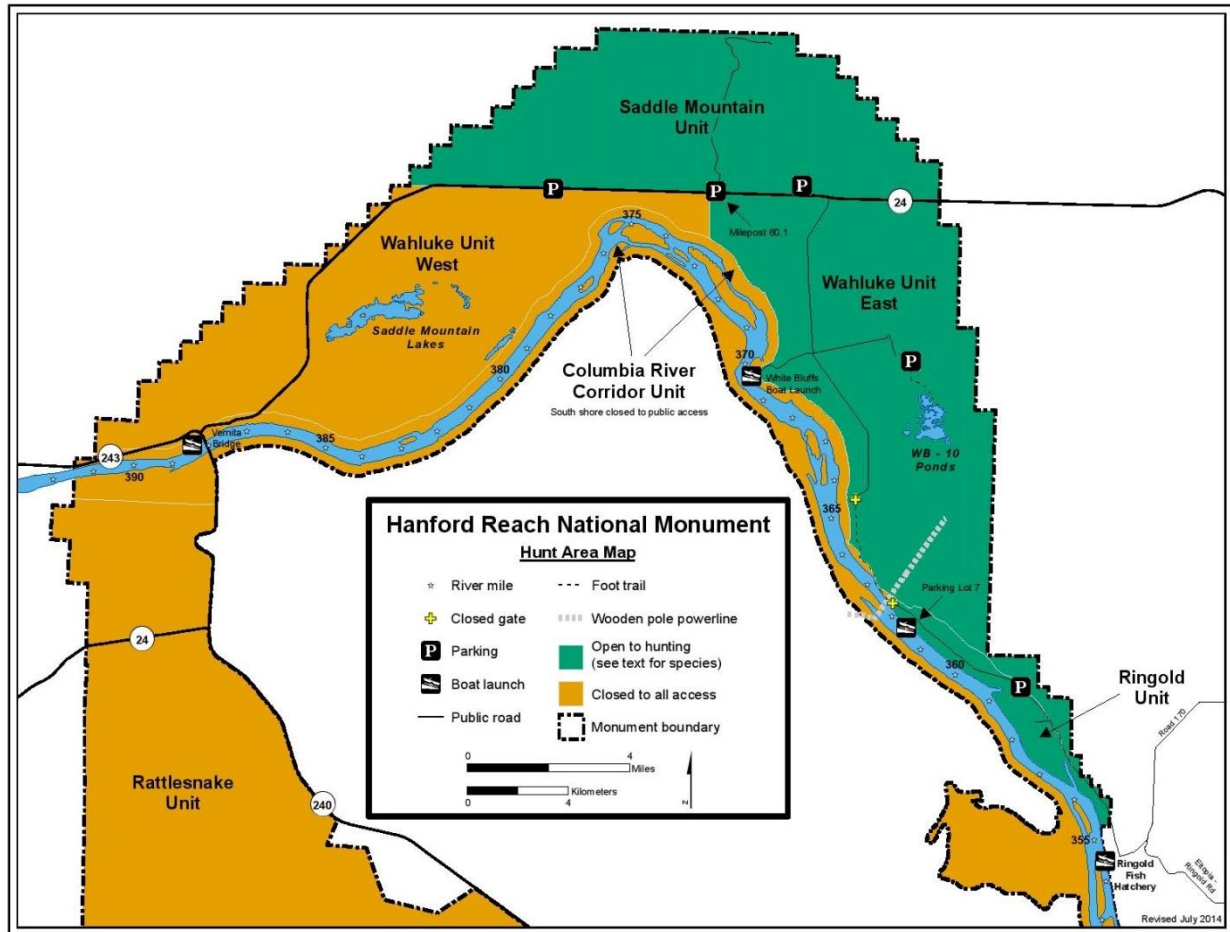


Figure 12. Hanford Reach National Monument showing areas with various hunting access designations.

THE COLUMBIA RIVER

All islands except privately owned, in the river, the Benton County shoreline below the high water mark, Central Hanford Department of Energy property, and any peninsula originating on the Benton County shoreline between Vernita Bridge on Highway 24 downstream to the Richland city limits are designated as closed areas to hunting wild animals and wild birds. The only exception is waterfowl hunting, which is open below the high water mark between the old Hanford town site power line crossing (wooden towers) and the Richland city limits. These details are printed in the [2017 Big Game Regulations](#) on page 87.

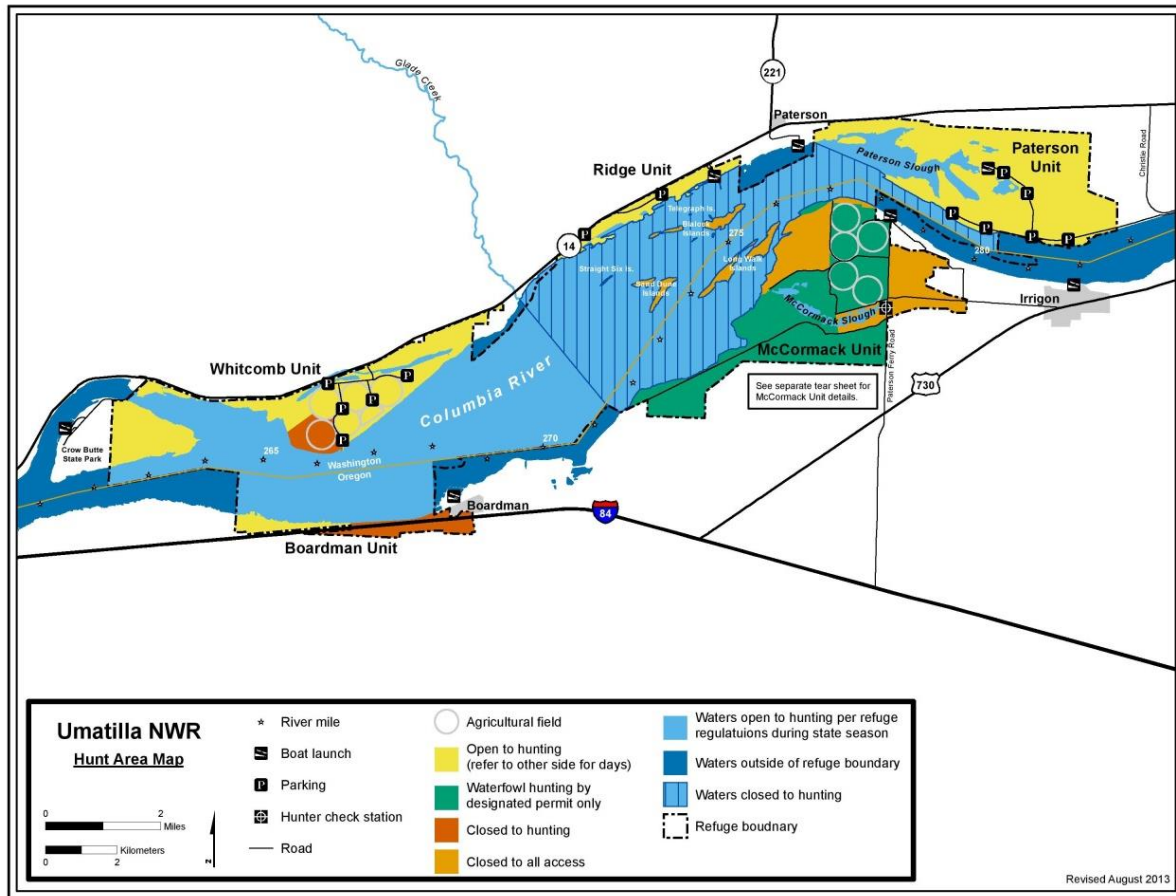


Figure 13. Umatilla National Wildlife Refuge, showing areas with various hunting access designations.

OTHER PUBLIC LANDS

Washington's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages land that is open to hunting unless otherwise posted. Benton and Franklin counties have a large amount of DNR acreage, but it is often leased to private landowners. While leased land may still be open to hunting, hunters should always be aware that adjacent landowners are often managing DNR land as part of their business operations, and hunters should be respectful of property boundaries. Consult a public lands map or [GoHunt](#) for more information.

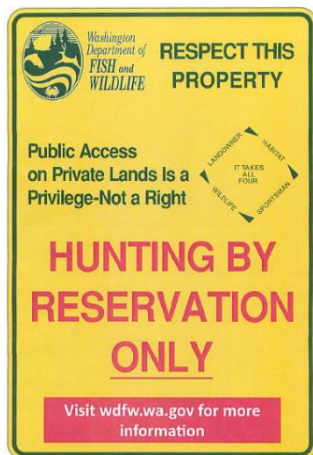
Various other public agencies own or manage land within Benton and Franklin counties that may also be open to hunting. The Bureau of Land Management allows hunting at [Juniper Dunes](#) and other properties within the district. The [Army Corps of Engineers](#) and the Bureau of Reclamation also allow hunting on portions of their land. Consult a public lands map or [GoHunt](#) for more information.

PRIVATE LANDS

WDFW provides and maintains a Private Lands Access program that allows the public to hunt on land owned by cooperating private landowners. In most cases these landowners receive no financial compensation for their enrollment in the program, and hunters should always respect their property and rules. By being a responsible guest on these private lands, hunters can help ensure they remain open for years to come and will continue to enhance WDFW's mission to expand private lands access. Access properties frequently change year to year and sometimes even within a season. Double check that lands previously available for hunting are still open to the public and in the same access program each year.

Information about private lands access sites, including site-specific regulations, locations, season availability, and contact information, can be found [here](#) and at [GoHunt](#).

There are four private land programs, and although each provides public, walk-in only access to private land, they function differently.



Hunt by Reservation

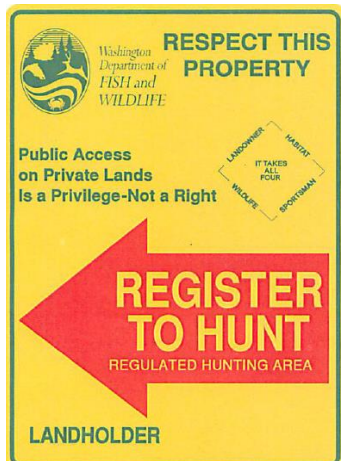
The Hunt by Reservation program requires hunters to register online at http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/hunting_access/private_lands/type/56/.

Hunters are required to print out and carry a permit, and they are provided a map of the property. In Benton and Franklin counties, multiple opportunities are available for both big game and bird hunting. More information about using the reservation sites can be found [here](#).



Feel Free to Hunt

Feel Free to Hunt is the largest access program in District 4, with dozens of properties totaling around 100,000 acres. It allows hunters to access designated land at any time during established hunting seasons. Most District 4 Feel Free to Hunt properties provide access for mule deer hunting, with some potential for upland bird hunting as well.



Register to Hunt

District 4 has several Register to Hunt sites in Benton County. Register to Hunt requires hunters to sign in at registration kiosks and carry a permit with them. District 4's Register to Hunt sites primarily provide waterfowl and upland bird hunting opportunities.



Hunt by Written Permission

Hunt by Written Permission sites require hunters to make contact with the landowner. Landowners then issue permits to hunters at their discretion and hunters are expected to carry this permit while they hunt. Landowner contact information can be found on the signs at the site. There are several Hunt by Written Permission properties within District 4, primarily in Franklin County, and they provide opportunities for both big game and bird hunting.

ONLINE TOOLS AND MAPS

A good starting point for hunters looking for a place to hunt is the GoHunt website at <http://apps.wdfw.wa.gov/gohunt/>. GoHunt is a valuable resource that provides hunters with information about public and private lands access points, GMU boundaries and harvest data, landscape features such as roads and topography, and a great deal more.

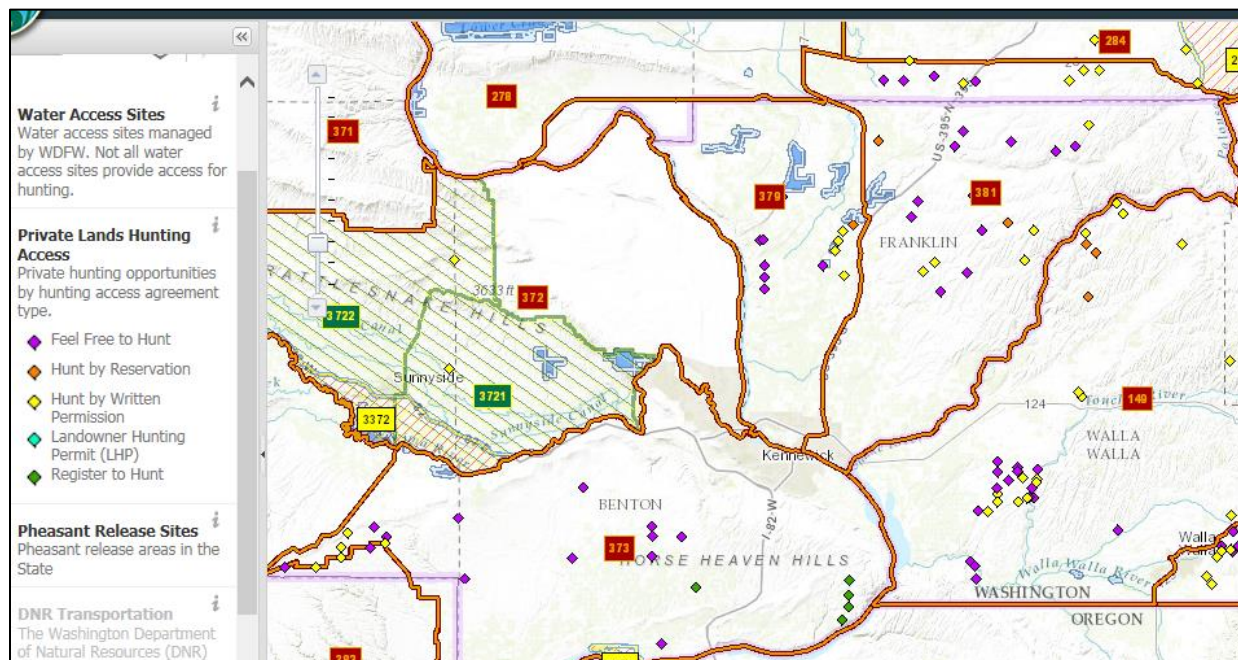


Image 7. Depiction of private lands access in District 4 from WDFW’s GoHunt website.

DIRECTIONS TO MESA LAKE REGISTER TO HUNT AREAS

Access Site #1

Driving Directions: In Franklin County, from Highway 395, take WA-17N toward Mesa/Moses Lake for 0.4 miles, turn northwest onto WA-17 for 0.9 miles, turn west onto Pepiot Road for 0.2 miles, turn slightly right onto 1 Avenue South for 0.1 mile, turn west on Sheffield Road for 0.6 miles, and turn west on gravel drive (Sunleaf) for 0.5 miles to the east parking lot.

Access Site #2

Driving Directions: In Franklin County, from Highway 395, take WA-17N toward Mesa/Moses Lake for 0.4 miles, turn northwest onto WA-17 for 0.9 miles, turn west onto Pepiot Road for 0.2 miles, turn slight right onto 1 Avenue South for 0.1 mile, turn west on Sheffield Pepiot Road for 1.8 miles, turn south on Langford Road for 0.8 miles, and turn east on gravel for 0.2 miles to the west parking lot/crude boat launch.

Other Information: No facilities. There is a five car limit during hunting seasons in either parking lot. No overnight camping or open fires. This is a Register to Hunt site. See kiosk for further information/restrictions.